

# Virginia Gardening

*with Jim May*

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June 2007

## **Plant perennials for a long-term investment in beauty**

June is perennial gardening month and right now is a perfect time to plant these long lasting beauties. Their popularity grows every year and with good reason. Some gardeners have given up entirely on annuals and plant perennials exclusively because they don't have to be replanted every year.

Most of the time, perennials are available commercially in cell packs or quart or gallon pots. Many catalogs sell them bare root when they are dormant. Smart gardeners will quickly learn that they can grow their own perennials from seed and from divisions and cuttings from fellow enthusiasts. Propagating perennials is another topic that I will cover in a future column.

What makes a plant a perennial? We classify plants according to their growth cycle as annuals, biennials or perennials. Annuals are short-lived plants that complete their entire life cycle in one growing season; they grow, flower and set seed in one season. Biennials normally don't bloom until the second season; then they form seeds and die. Perennials live from year to year with varying bloom times.

Perennials are also classed as woody (shrubs with woody above-ground stems and branches) or herbaceous (plants with soft green stems that often die back to ground level after frost). Herbaceous perennials persist by means of various underground storage structures - bulbs, corms, tubers, tuberous stems, tuberous roots and crowns.

Some plants are perennial in habit but are not generally considered perennials, such as cacti and succulents, ferns and ornamental grasses, bulbs and ground covers. Many herbs are perennials and only need minor care to keep them producing year after year.

The distinction between annuals and perennials, woody and herbaceous, is not always sharply defined because climate greatly influences growth potential. For example, herbaceous plants that are hardy in the eastern part of Virginia may need to be treated as annuals in the mountains because they won't survive the winters.

Even some woody plants are treated as perennials and can be cut back almost to the ground in spring, whether or not the cold winter has killed the branches. Examples include the popular Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*), Bluebeard (*Caryopteris*), Plumbago (*Ceratostigma*) and Russian Sage (*Perovskia*).

We further classify perennials by their tolerance of light or shade. There are full sun-loving perennials and shade lovers. The list of either is extensive, but local nurseries are great sources of information on selection of perennials.

Perennial flowers bloom sometimes for one week and occasionally for as long as ten weeks. Most have a short bloom time, so it is best to mix several varieties in a flowerbed to extend the bloom. A typical goal for a perennial garden is to have plants in bloom, or producing some type of display, throughout the growing season. Some desirable perennials are not grown for their flowers but for their foliage. Consider foliage texture when designing your perennial bed.

Choosing perennials requires more thought and knowledge than choosing annuals for the garden. This is because there are so many perennials, and they will be a relatively permanent addition to your landscape. Annual flowers generally tolerate a wide range of conditions, while perennial plants may have specific soil and light requirements. Check with local nursery personnel for types of perennials that will do best in your garden.

You should not consider perennials a low-maintenance plant for the flower garden. No plant is that perfect. Most perennials, if not all, require some type of specific care, such as dead heading, cutting back, or division to maintain the vigor of the plant. In addition, weeds are a constant problem in a perennial flower garden, so hand weeding and a good mulch layer are important.

Good bed preparation is extremely important for perennials. Remember that you are making a long-term planting; it is much easier and much less disruptive to improve the soil and correct drainage problems before planting.

You should deeply till or dig beds to a depth of at least eight to 10 inches. Good drainage is critical to the success of many perennials. Many perennials are deep-rooted. Most prefer soils high in organic matter, so be sure to add plenty of compost, peat moss or similar material. Have the soil tested. A pH of 6.0 to 6.5 is optimal for most perennials. Many soils require the addition of lime to correct pH. In the absence of a soil test, add a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 at the rate of 1-1/2 lbs. per 100 sq. ft. Incorporate the fertilizer (and lime if required) and rake the soil surface smooth.

As always, mulch the perennial bed to control weeds, maintain moisture and keep roots cool. Before winter, be sure to apply an extra layer of mulch to protect plants from extremes in temperatures. Happy gardening!

*Virginia Gardening with Jim May* is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.